

Counterterrorism Force

Building the Coast Guard Maritime Security Response Team.

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On September 11, 2001, the dynamic of national security shifted drastically, with attacks on U.S. soil for the first time since the beginning of World War II. Unlike the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, the terror attacks of 9/11 were aimed not at military targets, but at innocent civilians and the economic heart of the United States. These attacks signaled a distinct shift from the Cold War paradigms that had dominated U.S. strategic thinking and defense planning for more than 50 years.

Maritime Transportation Security Act of 2002, the Coast Guard began to equip, train, and deploy this new EMSST to execute a wide range of anti- and counterterrorism and advanced interdiction missions. Specifically, this unit was designed as an integrated air, surface, and maritime military/law enforcement force, capable of executing at-sea takedowns of hostile vessels or vessels seized by hostile forces.

Suddenly, the tools of security and defense the United States had relied on were no longer effective at guaranteeing the safety and security of the country or its people. This reality dictated a new maritime security response posture from the U.S. Coast Guard. Today, at the forefront of this emerging security mission is the new Coast Guard Maritime Security Response Team (MSRT) based in Chesapeake, Va. (Figure 1).

Developing the Force

Initial Coast Guard efforts to fill this capability gap in the post-9/11 world resulted in the development and fielding of a prototype unit, designated the Enhanced Maritime Safety and Security Team (EMSST) in Chesapeake, Va. Based on specific authority and guidance in the



Figure 1: The Maritime Security Response Team conducts vertical insertion drills on a 270-foot, medium endurance Coast Guard cutter.

The EMSST was designed around direct action sections; a boat detachment; a chemical, biological, nuclear, radiological, and explosive (CBNRE) detachment; and lift and support aviation assets. These capabilities were designed to operate in concert to provide the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with a highly capable maritime counterterrorism force for



Figure 2: A Coast Guard Maritime Safety and Security boarding team is delivered onto a vessel, via vertical insertion, from an HH-60 Jayhawk.

employment in the domestic Maritime Domain. Additionally, the EMSST could deploy in direct support of Department of Defense requirements under the Coast Guard's Title 10 authorities. Prior to the stand-up of this force, no U.S. government agency, outside the Department of Defense Special Operations Command, was capable of such integrated and complex maritime counterterrorism (CT) operations.

From its inception in spring 2004, EMSST was deployed in support of domestic maritime security requirements, both for Coast Guard law enforcement missions and in support of other U.S. government agencies. As requirements are refined in emerging national maritime security strategies and plans, the demand for EMSST capabilities continues to grow. This growing demand, as well as a full recognition of the seam in U.S. maritime defenses, has resulted in EMSST capability becoming a permanent part of the Coast Guard force structure. This transition was recently marked by recognition of EMSST as an official part of the Coast Guard, with its redesignation as Maritime Security Response Team.

Today, the Coast Guard stands ready to protect and defend U.S. maritime borders with a highly capable maritime counterterrorism force (Figure 2). As the unit

continues to refine its capabilities, there is much work still to be done. The MSRT needs additional assets and training to be fully mission-capable, as well as further integration into all national CT response plans. The latter is especially critical to ensure that no seam is left uncovered for U.S. enemies to exploit.

The Long-Term Solution

While closely examining maritime security issues and potential gaps in strategic counterterrorism response capabilities, DHS and National Security Council staff members came to a clear consensus that certain security requirements must be addressed in the near-term within the Maritime Domain, as well as other geographic parts of the country. To accomplish this goal, the Coast Guard is working with its partners within DHS and the executive branch to ensure that the U.S. maritime shield has the assets necessary to protect U.S. borders from all levels of threat. MSRT has been asked to fill an articulated security gap in the Maritime Domain.

These enhancements to existing Coast Guard maritime capabilities are intended to provide the United States an integrated maritime shield, with a sharpened sword, fully capable of defeating all maritime threats on the immediate horizon. While this Coast Guard vision provides a solution to combating maritime threats, the question of a fully resourced program remains. As the United States' only multi-mission, military / law enforcement force, spanning the homeland security to homeland defense seam, the Coast Guard is uniquely positioned to house a national maritime counterterrorism force. In an era of limited resources and unlimited security challenges, the Coast Guard also provides a logical home for the development of enhanced maritime interdiction and counterterrorism forces, capable of employment either in the law enforcement or defense arenas.

As the United States continues to resource assets to fill seams identified by the currently emerging maritime security strategies and plans, it is likely the Coast Guard will be called upon once again to leverage its unique place in the national security structure, in defense of U.S. maritime borders.

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